

# **Learning from the Successes and Failures of the Westcliff Flats Residents Association\***

**Rebecca Hinely\*\***  
**Barak D. Hoffman\*\*\***  
**Orlean Naidoo\*\*\*\***

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## **Abstract**

The Westcliff Flats Residents Association (WFRA), a Community-Based Organization in Durban, South Africa, was very effective at ending evictions and disconnections from electricity and water in their community, but had little success in fighting Westcliff's drug problem. This paper seeks to account for these divergent outcomes and in so doing, demonstrate that research can be useful for helping civil society organizations be more successful in their advocacy efforts. We find two factors account for the differing outcomes. First, the fight against evictions and disconnections created a sense of community around a problem, while the drug problem isolates members of the community from each other. Second, while the WFRA was able to leverage opportunities that democracy creates to end evictions and disconnections, democratic rights have been ineffective in ridding the community of drugs and drug dealers. In addition, our research into the successful campaign to stop evictions and cutoffs provides practical information for how the WFRA can fight drugs and drug dealers in the community. First, the community did not solve evictions and service disconnections all at once, but achieved incremental successes through breaking a large issue into smaller ones. Second, small victories created a sense of empowerment, which encouraged them to take more ambitious actions. Both findings provide pragmatic advice for how civil society organizations can be more effective, an area that most research on social movements tends to ignore.

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\*\* Center for Civil Society, University of KwaZulu-Natal and Development Management and Policy Program, Georgetown University.

\*\*\* Center for Democracy and Civil Society, Georgetown University. Corresponding author: bdh29@georgetown.edu.

\*\*\*\* Center for Civil Society University of KwaZulu-Natal and Westcliff Flats Residents Association.

## ***Introduction***

The Westcliff Flats Residents Association (WFRA) has achieved some impressive successes. A decade ago the residents of Westcliff, a low-income suburb of Durban, South Africa, were facing mass evictions from their dilapidated government-owned homes, suffering from widespread cutoffs of electricity and water, and had a very acrimonious relationship with their municipal government. Today, the situation has improved dramatically. Instead of facing evictions from their decrepit homes, the community is in the process of becoming owners of their renovated ones on their own terms. Rather than facing disconnections from electricity and water, the community receives these services at prices they can afford. Instead of having a hostile relationship with their local government, they cooperate with it to solve many problems. Nevertheless, at the same time the community was achieving these impressive gains, they were unable to solve an equally as vexing problem, the presence of dangerous drugs and drug dealers in the community, and, as a result, have largely stopped taking actions to combat it. Why was the WFRA successful in ending evictions and disconnections, but not in ridding the community of drugs and drug dealers?

For many years, scholars and policy makers have recognized the importance of good research for constructing effective policies. By contrast, studies of social movements tend not to focus on the practical advice research can provide civil society organizations. This is both surprising and disappointing. It is surprising because foreign aid organizations have been actively working to build the capacity of civil

society organizations for many years. It is disappointing because the people who can gain the most from research on social movements - those engaged in advocacy campaigns - tend to benefit little from studies of them. This paper seeks to demonstrate how research can provide pragmatic suggestions to these people and organizations.

This paper examines the success of the WFRA's efforts to end housing evictions and service disconnections, and its failure to eradicate drugs from the community. We find that two crucial factors account for why they were successful in the former, but not in the latter. First, while evictions and cutoffs provided a sense of communal solidarity around a problem, drugs isolates members of the community from one another. Second, the WFRA learned how to leverage democracy to stop the evictions and disconnections, but democratic rights have not been useful in fighting the problem of drugs because drug dealers bribe the South Africa Police Service officers and the courts not to enforce drug laws.

Beyond identifying the factors that account for the success and failure in these two efforts, our research provides lessons for how the organization might be able to address the problems drugs are creating in the community. First, winning the fight against evictions and disconnections did not come all at once, but through a multi-year struggle where the WFRA achieved many incremental gains (and a few large ones), as well as suffered numerous setbacks. Second, taking action and achieving small victories in the fight against evictions and disconnections created a sense of

empowerment that encouraged greater action. By contrast, inaction on the fight against drugs creates a sense of disempowerment and hopelessness that further discourages engaging on the issue. In combination, these factors suggest that while the WFRA may not be able to eradicate drugs and drug dealers from the community at the moment, there are smaller actions they can take, such as working with youth to keep them from starting to use drugs. While such efforts are unlikely to solve the problem and may not elicit greater government accountability in the near-term, they can achieve an incremental success that would help create a sense of empowerment and thus catalyze more ambitious actions, just as occurred with the campaigns to end evictions and service disconnections. The paper also points to three more general lessons about designing effective advocacy efforts, achieving greater accountability may be a non-linear process, success in one issue may not easily translate to other ones, and that psychological and social factors can inhibit addressing exigent problems.

In the next section, we examine research on civil society in South Africa since the country's democratic transition. In the following section, we present our case studies of the WFRA's two campaigns. Subsequently, we examine the practical advice that emerges from our case studies. We conclude the paper with a discussion on how future research can advance efforts to help civil society organizations to be more effective.

### ***Civil Society in Contemporary South Africa***

Civil society in post-Apartheid South Africa is fundamentally different than its anti-Apartheid predecessors. While civil society was a major force during the fight against Apartheid, many social movements demobilized following South Africa's democratic transition.<sup>1</sup> Civil society reemerged in the late 1990s as a result of the effects of the African National Congress's (ANC) neo-liberal economic policies on the poor. These policies led to a rise in unemployment, falling incomes, and less affordable housing and services, such as electricity and water. Those who remain disadvantaged have mobilized to fight these policies, exerting themselves largely (but not exclusively) through sustained protests for the past decade.<sup>2</sup> In this section, we discuss the context in which these new movements emerged, examine their evolution, and discuss the state response to them.

### *The Context for New Social Movements*

When the ANC came into power in 1994 following South Africa's first democratic election, many of the social movements that were central to the fight against Apartheid demobilized. Social movements reemerged in the late 1990s after the ANC shifted from its original statist platform, articulated in the Reconstruction and Development Programs (RDP) towards neo-liberal policies embracing free market principals and fiscal austerity, as outlined in the Growth, Employment and

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<sup>1</sup> We use the terms civil society and social movements interchangeably.

<sup>2</sup> Civil society has also mobilized around South Africa's HIV/AIDS crisis, but these movements are beyond the scope of this paper.

Redistribution (GEAR) program. These policies led to massive job losses, increasing prices for services, and rising inequality (Ballard 2005).

The job losses and rising prices for services, such as water and electricity that resulted from GEAR, caused many people to fall into arrears on their housing and service payments. Many municipal governments responded repressively to non-payment by disconnecting people from these services and evicting those who could not afford their rent in state-provided housing (Barchiesi 2004).

The social movements that were at the forefront of the anti-Apartheid movement did not come to the aid of the poor who were harmed by these policies after South Africa's democratic transition. Rather, a number of them, such as the large and powerful Congress of South Africa Labour Unions (COSATU), allied themselves with the ANC. In addition, a number of NGOs sought partnerships with the government and fostered a client-patron relationship with the ANC (Bond 2004). Furthermore, after the end of Apartheid, foreign donors largely stopped funding non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) directly and instead channeled their funds through the state (Marais 1998). The ANC, in turn, tended to favor organizations that would work to help implement their policy priorities, not those who opposed them. As a result of these changes, following South Africa's democratic transition, the poor who were harmed by the ANC's policies had no advocates from the struggle against Apartheid to assist them. Instead, they had to find a new way to press for accountability around the issues that concerned them, relying only on themselves.

### *New Generation of Social Movements*

Due to the dissolution of many anti-Apartheid civil society organizations and the ANC's co-option of many others, there is little continuity between those that emerged to challenge Apartheid and the new generation of social movements. Instead, a number of movements developed in the late 1990s around local concerns and demands, particularly unemployment, lack of adequate housing, and unaffordable services, problems they attributed to the ANC's neo-liberal reforms. The most ubiquitous manifestation of these new movements is protests, which are now a daily occurrence in South Africa. According to one analysis, "Just a decade after the streets were burning, analysts are seeing evidence of a new season of symptoms of exclusion and frustration (Botes, et al. 2007: 1)." Similarly, Doreen Atkinson observes that, "For a Rip van Winkle who had fallen asleep in 1988 and awoken in 2005 it might appear as if the 'rolling mass action' of the end-of-apartheid period has simply continued into the dawn of democratic government in South Africa (Botes, et al. 2007: 1)." While these campaigns vary in their strategies and effectiveness, protest and other forms of social mobilization are one of the most visible and active political forces in post-Apartheid South Africa.

The new social movements are far different in organization than their anti-Apartheid predecessors. Rather than representing a broad and unified social movement, these organizations often are little more than collections of angry

citizens lacking a clear direction and largely working in isolation from each other (Bond, et al. 2010). One important reason they remain fragmented is because they face difficulties in articulating their demands in simple frames that have widespread resonance, such as us versus them, or right versus wrong. During Apartheid, by contrast, civil society organized to protest against the racist and anti-democratic regime. While communities faced their own problems, they all could identify themselves as being morally opposed to the regime. After South Africa's transition to democracy, there is no clear enemy as few of these groups are calling for systemic change. Rather, their demands appear more material than moral in nature as they largely are advocating for jobs, better housing, and more affordable services not a new political system. As a result, unlike during Apartheid, these new social movements lack the capacity to express their demands in contrasting moral narratives with widespread appeal.

Nevertheless, there have been some attempts to improve coordination among these groups. Among the more visible ones are the Johannesburg's Anti-Privatization Forum (APF), Durban's Concerned Citizens' Forum (CCF), and Cape Town's Anti-Eviction Campaign (AEC). However, despite their attempts to broaden and unify disparate local movements, these organizations largely remain umbrella bodies (Barchiesi 2004). Below we discuss the general response of the state to these new movements and examine some of the more visible ones in greater detail.

### *State Response*

In May 2000, South Africa's President Thabo Mbeki addressed the Ebenezer Baptist Church, the congregation of the late Dr. Martin Luther King. Mbeki argued that while the fight against Apartheid was over, South Africa still "should continue with this struggle...for social and economic justice for the poor" (Bond 2001: 424). Unfortunately, his rhetorical support for reducing South Africa's vast inequalities did not translate itself into assisting the organizations that have emerged to seek this objective.

While some local governments are responsive to the demands of these new social movements (as we document in detail in our case study), the ANC and the central government have been generally hostile to them. They see these new civil society organizations as sources of polarization that impede reforms necessary to make South Africa's economy more competitive internationally. In many ways, instead of being responsive to their demands, the state has worked to stigmatize these organizations, casting them as extremist agitators. They claim that illegal tactics and violent protests, though staples of the anti-apartheid movement, are not justified now that South Africa is a democracy. The central government has thus set up a limited space for sanctioned public participation, portraying the new social movements as a disloyal opposition (Ballard 2005). While South Africa's current president, Jacob Zuma, appears to have more tolerance for their criticisms than his predecessor, Thabo Mbeki, the policies have not changed in any dramatic fashion.

The Regulations of Gatherings Act is a particular useful law the state employs to manage protests (Memeza 2006). According to the act, organizations wishing to hold a protest must apply for a permit at least seven days prior to the event. This enables the state to declare protests they don't want to occur illegal, as happened in many of the cases we examine below. The state has even come close to banning some civil society groups, such as Abahlali baseMijondolo (Memeza 2006). Furthermore, the seven-day notice period implicitly suppresses dissent by providing time for the state to defuse the force behind protests.

### *Case Studies*

A number of case studies of these new social movements exist. The analyses highlight their diverse range, the differing strategies they choose, and the varying government responses they provoke. Unfortunately, these studies tend not to employ research designs attempting to identify the factors that account for the success or failure of advocacy efforts. As a result, it is difficult to generalize about why some movements are more effective than others. For the same reason, these studies generally fail to provide any clear and practical advice for how movements can be more successful.

Social movements in Durban have received a significant amount of attention (e.g., Desai 2002, Dwyer 2004). These works offer an enormous amount of detail about the various groups working in Durban, including their leadership, strategies, and

successes. Desai (2002) presents an extremely detailed account of efforts in Chatsworth, an Asian suburb of Durban, to end evictions and service disconnections in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and the Durban municipal government's response to these efforts. Dwyer (2004) focuses significant attention on the difficulties the CCF encountered in attempting to build a larger and more unified social movement from the collection of smaller ones in Durban. Although the CCF tried to coordinate and unify the large number of local movements in Durban, there was significant resistance to such efforts among a number of groups and, as a result, it largely remains an umbrella organization. Thus, while the CCF organizes protests, links groups to each other, and provides a forum for sharing tactics, civil society organizations in Durban largely remain focused on their own conflicts. For these reasons, the CCF's efforts have brought visibility to the problems many in Durban face today, but have achieved little success in creating a unified social movement in the municipality.

Social movements in the Western Cape also have received a significant amount of attention, especially those of the AEC and its affiliates. The AEC formed in 2001 largely in response to water cutoffs, evictions, and general discontent with the ANC's economic policies (Oldfield and Stokke 2006). Like the CCF, the AEC is largely an umbrella group as well, linking a diverse range of community organizations. The manner in which separate affiliates choose to mobilize varies greatly. Broadly speaking, the most common strategies are protesting, engaging with government officials, and/or suing the government.

The United Civic Front's (UCF) campaign in Valhalla Park presents a failed example of using protest to foment change, but a successful one of using courts to enforce rights. The UCF occupied state owned land because the Cape Town municipal government refused to provide sanitation and water to their informal settlement. The UCF sued the Cape Town City Council to force it to provide these services. The court agreed with the UCF and rejected the council's appeal, providing a major victory for their efforts (Stokke and Oldfield 2004).

The Mandela Park Anti-Eviction Campaign (MPAEC), another AEC affiliate, is a good example of both the desire of some groups to remain autonomous, as well as the limits of a protest-only approach. While the group mobilized numerous protests in opposition to housing evictions, they were reluctant to participate in actions that would pull them away from the force of their collective mobilization or cause them to lose their autonomy. Their occupation of banks and public spaces, and their violent protests provoked a repressive state response. Despite these setbacks, the Mandela Park activists refused to do anything to risk their autonomy (Stokke and Oldfield 2004: 18-19):

We don't accept money from anybody for a simple reason: we don't want them to direct us. We are on the ground. We will direct our struggle. So we don't want NGOs to rule us or to act on our behalf, because they don't have our interests at heart. They have their own interests at heart. We understand that and I always make it clear that the NGOs that get paid to be in the struggle - we don't. We are forced to be in the struggle because of our circumstances at home.

Due to the lack of resources they possess and their reluctance to work with other organizations, the MPAEC remains weak, isolated, and largely ineffective.

Analyses of social movements from other parts of South Africa corroborate that no clear link exists between mobilization and more accountable government:

- Khutsong, a township in Merafong Municipality, Gauteng Province, demonstrates that protests can be counterproductive at times. In Kutsong, protests devastated the community because they caused fear rather than a perception that people were mobilizing for productive purposes, and little changed as a result (Johnstone and Bernstein 2007).
- Protests in Phumelela, Free State Province, show that even when protest leads to a positive government response, creating substantive change remains difficult. Violent Protests in Phumelela did result in improved public administration, but led to no substantive changes in living conditions (Johnstone and Bernstein 2007).
- Protests in Phomolang, Gauteng Province, are an example of engagement failing to elicit a positive government response, but protest succeeding. The community initially chose peaceful efforts to urge the municipal government to improve governance and make services more affordable through a letter writing campaign and attempts to meet peacefully with municipal officials in

2003 and 2004. However, by 2005, the community changed tactics and began to protest. This change in strategy was successful in obtaining more affordable services and improving the pace of housing construction (Botes, et al. 2007).

### *Research fails to offer practical advice*

It is clear that the effectiveness of these new social movements varies considerably. Many organizations focus solely on protest, while others are open to dialogue with their local government, and still others attempt to use the courts to press their demands. Some efforts elicit a positive government response, others a negative one, and some receive no response at all. Research on civil society in contemporary South Africa thus has provided valuable qualitative accounts of the country's emergent civil society dynamics. While the ethnographies of these movements provide great detail on how they organize and operate, as well as the state reactions they trigger, they rarely provide pragmatic advice outside of broad generalizations, such as acknowledging the importance of coordination and diverse campaign tactics. Because they lack a coherent research design, it difficult to generalize about what approaches are more useful and why. Thus, we are missing practical research that can help strengthen these new movements. We show how research can make such a contribution in the next section.

### ***The Successes and Failures of The Westcliff Flats Residents Association***

In this section, we examine the success and failure of two Westcliff Flats Residents Association's (WFRA) advocacy campaigns to elicit greater accountability. After a narrative account of the campaigns, we attempt to determine why the association was successful in one area, securing better access to housing, electricity, and water, while it was unsuccessful in eradicating drugs and drug dealers from the community.

The WFRA is a community-based organization (CBO) in Chatsworth, a largely Asian (Indian) suburb of Durban, South Africa.<sup>3</sup> The Durban municipal government began to force Asians to settle in Chatsworth in the early 1960s as part of a wider effort to create racially homogeneous neighborhoods in Durban (Desai 2002). Chatsworth is comprised of 14 units of varying levels of income. Westcliff is one of the poorer ones and the community formed the WFRA in 1998 as a response to housing evictions, electricity and water cutoffs, and rising rents. The WFRA is a highly structured organization. Its leadership consists of a Chair, Vice-Chair, Secretary, and Treasurer. It also has 12 working committee members. Members of the WFRA elect the leadership and the organization holds weekly meetings that typically 100 people attend. In the meetings, the WFRA leaders convey their ongoing work, solicit community concerns, and educate the residents of Westcliff about relevant municipal issues, such as changes to the price of electricity or water. While South Africa's social, political, and economic context helps explain why the WFRA came

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<sup>3</sup> In South Africa, the term Asian refers to those of Indian descent.

into existence, examining the organization's efforts and the government response they provoked are critical for understanding why they succeeded in one area, but failed in another.

The research design we employ not only allows us to ascertain the factors that account for the WFRA's ability to achieve greater accountability in one area and failure in another, but also permits us to provide practical advice for how civil society organizations can be more effective. By examining the same organization, in the same community, at the same point in time confront two different issues, we are able to hold constant a wide range of factors that can account for the differing outcomes of those efforts, such as organizational strength, social, economic, and political context, and institutional variation. While such a research design limits its applicability to different contexts (i.e., limits its external validity), this tradeoff is inevitable if we want to conduct research that can provide useful insights.

*Success: The Campaign for Better Housing and Services*

As we noted in the previous section, many social movements in contemporary South Africa emerged as a result of effects of the ANC's neo-liberal policies. The WFRA is a good example of how and why this occurred. In the late 1990s, fiscal austerity

programs at the local level led to rising rents and prices for basic services, such as electricity and water, reductions in income assistance grants, and evictions and service cutoffs to those in arrears. Combined with South Africa's chronic poverty and unemployment problems, these policies had a devastating effect in Westcliff. A community survey in June 1999, conducted by the Institute for Black Research, the Concerned Citizens Group, and the WFRA, made the scale of the community's economic problems clear:

- 76% of the community lived below the poverty line, at least 62% of the households did not have enough income to buy sufficient amounts of food, and 14% had no income at all.
- 41% of the households received state-provided welfare grants.
- The unemployment rate was 58% (40% officially unemployed and a further 18% classified as housewives, but who were seeking employment).
- Housing conditions in the community were appalling.

Because most families lived in dire economic conditions, the residents of Westcliff could not afford to pay more in rent or for services when these costs rose and their social grants were cut. Like many other social movements in South Africa, the WFRA emerged in the context of a local economic crisis. However, it was not an economic

crisis alone. Rather, economic hardship manifested itself as a political crisis. South Africa's democratic transition was supposed to increase government accountability. Yet the municipal government was not responsive to their needs, but hostile to them.

The campaign to end housing evictions and obtain affordable services began as a reaction to an unanticipated problem, the attempted eviction of Vasie Williams by the Durban municipal government from her government-owned flat in 1997. At that time there was no organization in the neighborhood that could help Williams respond. Moreover, as the community had never experienced this type of action since South Africa's democratic transition in 1994, they did not know how to respond. As in much of South Africa, the residents of Westcliff believed that democracy was supposed to end repressive and unaccountable government, yet this did not seem to be occurring. Despite lacking the knowledge of how to make the government more responsive to their needs, members of the community wanted to help, but they had only limited success in attempting to keep Williams in her flat. Specifically, while they were able to shift control of the apartment to Williams from her unreliable husband, this was only a temporary solution as she was unable to afford the monthly rent. This was the first of many partial successes the community would experience in their fights to end evictions and service cutoffs.

At the same time members of the community were attempting to find a more durable solution for Williams, in 1998, the municipal government cut social

assistance and child maintenance grants by one-third, raised rents on government-owned flats, and began disconnecting people who were in arrears on their electricity and water bills and evicting those who could not afford their rent. The government's indifference to the dire economic conditions in the community catalyzed the residents of Westcliff into formal organization and they created the Westcliff Flats Residents Association (WFRA). Nevertheless, creating an association was far from knowing how to organize effectively. As a result, the WFRA's efforts at that time were characterized by learning by doing. Their initial strategies were engaging directly with municipal officials and elected ward councilors, protesting, and learning how to (illegally) restore electricity and water connections after cutoffs.<sup>4</sup> These early forms of organization were largely reactive, occurring when the municipality instigated an eviction or a disconnection. The WFRA also began to frame their efforts in simple narratives, such as right versus wrong, and the community versus the government.

While protesting and illegally reconnecting did not succeed in ending the crisis, it did provide an early sense of empowerment. The former was especially courageous since municipal officials often showed up with police, armed security, and/or attack dogs to evict people and/or cutoff their access to services. These events were often violent as well. Standing up to the intimidation created both a sense of empowerment and solidarity.

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<sup>4</sup> The WFRA engaged a number of municipal officials. Among the most prominent were the Deputy City Manager, the Manager of Housing for Administration, the Manager of Housing for Maintenance and Upgrading, and the heads of the electricity, revenue, and water departments.

Engaging with municipal officials and political parties, by contrast, was ineffective and therefore demoralizing at first. It was clear that it was going to take more than elections to bring democracy to Westcliff. In particular, Westcliff's ward councilors, Nunkumar Rajaram of the Minority Front (a largely Asian party) and Sharmaine Morar of the ANC, were not helpful in the community's efforts to stop the evictions and service cutoffs.<sup>5</sup> More broadly, the WFRA found that working with political parties at that time was unproductive as they were generally distant from the community. From the point of view of the community, local politicians were people who came to their neighborhood only right before elections, made many promises, and promptly forgot them after the election. Since elected officials appeared indifferent to the problems in Westcliff, municipal officials also had no incentive to address them.

Nevertheless, the relationship between the WFRA and political parties in Chatsworth is more complex than a simple narrative of indifferent politicians suggests. The WFRA encountered two challenges in pushing elected local officials and political parties more generally to be responsive to their demands. First, while the local council was (and still is) dominated by the ANC, Westcliff's ward councilor represented the MF, a weak opposition party. Since their councilor came from a small opposition party, he did not have good access to municipal resources or much

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<sup>5</sup> Voters cast two ballots in local elections in South Africa, a single-member district ballot and an at-large proportional representation (PR) one. Rajaram was elected on the single member district ballot and Morar was elected on the PR one. The ANC subsequently assigned Morar to Westcliff.

political power. Second, Westcliff is a poor neighborhood in a somewhat wealthier ward. As a result, the concerns of the average voter in the ward are rather different than the concerns of the average resident of Westcliff, and many in the ward were unsympathetic to (or ignorant of) their problems. Since Westcliff at that time seemed like a marginal political constituency, political parties felt that ignoring their concerns was not a politically risky strategy. For similar reasons, municipal officials could ignore the WFRA's demands as well.<sup>6</sup>

In the following year, 1999, the WFRA began to see more visible successes. The catalyst was Fatima Meer's emergence in the community. Meer was a famous Asian anti-Apartheid campaigner and in 1999 she came to Chatsworth to generate support for the ANC in the run-up to the general election. Meer was unfamiliar with the difficulties the residents of Westcliff faced in securing access to housing, electricity, and water, and the general government hostility to the needs of the community. After seeing the plight of the community, Meer decided to stop campaigning for the ANC and assist the residents of Westcliff instead.

Meer introduced two innovations to the WFRA's efforts, helping the organization in formulating clear demands and strategies for engaging with municipal officials, and teaching the community how to use their rights, especially access to housing. While the former was not successful at first, Meer was able to show the WFRA how to engage forcefully with municipal government officials through her strident demands

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<sup>6</sup> Westcliff only became a politically important area to address when the WFRA brought publicity to their problems.

and refusal to back down in the face of hostility. Even though she did not succeed in achieving any policy changes through her actions, watching Meer empowered members of the WFRA because they learned how to confront their government. By contrast, the latter strategy - using courts to stop evictions - was a demonstrable success. Meer informed the WFRA that evicting someone who was in arrears was illegal according to South Africa's Constitution and showed the organization how to file lawsuits to stop them. The lawsuits never came to trial and in 2000 the municipality stopped attempting to evict people in Westcliff. While in retrospect this was the WFRA's first major victory, this was not clear at the time.

In addition, although the evictions stopped after 2000, disconnections continued and the WFRA resorted to the same strategies to stop them: engagement, protest, and the courts. Interestingly, the method that proved most effective at stopping the evictions, the courts, was ineffective at stopping disconnections. Rather, the association's legal advisors suggested that engagement and protest were likely to be more effectual because the legality of disconnections was less clean than it was for evictions. Thus, the WFRA took to the streets to demand an end to the cutoffs and continued illegal electricity and water reconnections.

From the campaign to stop evictions, the community also learned that elections were a time when they could press their demands forcefully as elected officials, political parties, and the municipal government were amenable to their demands (or at least not hostile to them) during campaigns. This proved especially helpful in

2004 when campaigning for the next set of elections began. While the ANC did not attempt to gain support in Westcliff, it did solicit votes in Bayview, a neighboring community.<sup>7</sup> In a community meeting in Bayview, the Deputy Mayor announced that the municipality was going to renovate the municipal-owned residencies in their neighborhood (but not in Westcliff). The WFRA disrupted the meeting, presenting their demands to the Deputy Mayor. Soon after, the municipality held another meeting announcing renovations in a much wider geographical area, including Westcliff, thus constituting another WFRA victory in achieving more responsive governance. Unfortunately, the municipality underestimated the scale of the repairs the flats needed. As a result, the renovations were not successful and the WFRA kicked the contractors out of Westcliff in 2006.

Moreover, even though the municipality agreed to renovate government-owned housing in Westcliff, disconnections continued. In 2007 and 2008, the municipality attempted to end the problem of arrears through installing pre-paid electricity and water meters. Pre-paid meters shut off the flow of electricity or water when the balance on pre-paid credits reaches zero. This was highly unpopular in Westcliff as residents understood that lack of affordable water and electricity could now lead to permanent cutoffs and the residents damaged the meters in order to signal their

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<sup>7</sup> Bayview and Westcliff belong to different wards in Chatsworth. Since the population of Bayview forms a significantly larger percentage of its ward population than does Chatsworth, politicians exert greater efforts to solicit votes in the former than the latter.

dislike for them.<sup>8</sup> The municipality, in turn, retaliated through widespread disconnections, sparking mass protests from the residents of Westcliff.

Subsequent to these protests, the municipality agreed to a meeting with WFRA. The association offered a compromise to the municipal government: if the latter placed a moratorium on cutoffs and evictions, the WFRA would end their civil disobedience and peacefully engage with the municipal government to address their problems. Much to the shock of the WFRA, the municipal government agreed to their demands and to this day has honored the arrangement. This constructive collaboration has been successful in obtaining housing renovations, establishing a plan for private ownership of renovated municipal flats, and in reaching a compromise that the municipality should consider how much people in Westcliff can afford to pay for water and electricity when determining prices for these services.

To what extent did external factors such as the CCF, the Center for Civil Society at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, and media coverage play in the success of the advocacy campaign to achieve greater government responsiveness to the needs of the residents of Westcliff? While the WFRA recognizes (and appreciates) that external actors assisted their efforts, these forces alone played at best an indirect role in their success. Fatima Meer is a good example. It was not her direct interventions, but teaching the WFRA how to advocate more effectively and use the courts to enforce their rights that accounts for the importance of her influence. The

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<sup>8</sup> Although it is possible to illegally restore connections to pre-paid meters, it is a much more difficult and dangerous procedure than for non-pre-paid ones.

CCF played a similar role. Although it was useful for linking WFRA with other groups in Durban, bringing visibility to Westcliff's problems, and helping the WFRA learn advocacy strategies, the CCF on its own had no direct influence. This is an important point to recognize because it alerts us that external pressure for more accountable government did not substitute for community action.

From the vantage point of 2010, it is clear that the campaign to end evictions and service cutoffs was a clear success. Moreover, the WFRA gained an enormous amount of confidence as a result of securing these gains. Unfortunately, the organization learned the hard way that success in one venue does not directly translate to a different one. It is to their failed effort to rid the community of drugs and drug dealers to which we now turn.

### *Failure: The Campaign to Rid Westcliff of Drugs and Drug Dealers*

At the same time as the WFRA was going from success to success in obtaining better housing and more affordable water and electricity, drugs and drug dealers were becoming an increasingly serious problem in Westcliff. To this day, the WFRA has achieved very limited success in addressing this issue. While the threat that drugs pose in the community today has abated somewhat compared to a few years ago, this is a result of factors unrelated to the WFRA's efforts to address the issue and, as

a result, the situation could deteriorate at any time.<sup>9</sup> In addition, while the dangers drug dealers create has diminished somewhat, the problems associated with drug addiction remain.

In 2002, a serious drug epidemic began in Westcliff that continues today. This is when Sugars hit the streets of Westcliff. Sugars is a cheap and highly addictive heroin derivative, analogous to crack cocaine. The drug is a combination of heroin and a caking agent, such as powdered rat poison, cooked into small rocks and smoked. The drug is especially addictive because withdrawal causes intense physical pain. Sugars has divided the community against itself, led to a wave of crime in Westcliff, and destroyed numerous lives and families. The WFRA attempted to tackle the drug problem in Westcliff. Unfortunately, they had little success as attempts to protest, use their rights to have the government enforce drug laws, and engage government officials all have failed to elicit positive changes.

Most important, the WFRA has been unable to frame the drug issue in a simple narrative of right versus wrong or us versus them for a number of reasons. As a result, they have been unable to create a sense of communal solidarity around the issue. One reason is because the drug dealers are part of the community. They employ many people, including those who do not use the drug (such as pensioners), as runners, lookouts, and to store the drugs. In addition, their relatives live in the

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<sup>9</sup> The threat from drugs has subsided somewhat for two reasons. First, turf wars between dealers are no longer occurring. Second, the Durban Metro Police have started taking a more aggressive stance against drugs (see below).

community. Two, fear is an effective deterrent to engaging on the issue in a public way. Drug dealers have guns and know how to use them. This was made forcefully clear to one of the authors,<sup>10</sup> when her family came very close to being victims of a drive-by shooting in an attempt to dissuade her from organizing around the issue. Equally as important, addicts and those who the drug dealers employ can coerce others into not engaging on the issue by threatening retaliation. Three, many people do not wish to talk about the issue because they do not want to bring shame to their families. Parents, spouses, siblings, and children often are embarrassed that members of their family are addicted to drugs and do not want to discuss the damage it causes. The stigma that many members of the community who are not using the drug attach to those who are (especially if they outside their family) reinforces this embarrassment. Finally, there is no consensus on who is responsible for the drug problem. Instead, people blame a variety of actors, including the police, the dealers, and the addicts. For these reasons, the community has not been able to address the problem of drugs through protesting and/or engaging with municipal officials in public ways because no sense of unity exists on fighting the issue.

Using their rights has also been ineffective for addressing the drug problem. Members of the community know where the drug dealers live and drugs are highly visible in Westcliff. As a result, the South Africa Police Service (SAPS) and the courts would have no problem arresting and prosecuting the dealers if they had an incentive to do so. Unfortunately, SAPS does not enforce drug laws in Chatsworth for

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<sup>10</sup> Orlean Naidoo

not only do drug dealers have guns, they also have money and the SAPS officers in Chatsworth are easily corruptible, in part due to low pay and in part due to tolerance for it within the police force. This corruption is highly visible in Westcliff, with SAPS officers accepting bribes from drug dealers in public. While SAPS officers occasionally arrest people involved with the drug trade, detainees quickly make bail. In addition, even if cases do make it to court, drug dealers also bribe court officials and thus cases rarely go to trial.

The community has little capacity to demand that SAPS and the courts enforce drug laws because these officials are accountable only to the central government, not the municipal government. As a result, pressuring municipal officials has not been an effective strategy for addressing corruption in SAPS and the courts. Moreover, because the WFRA is a small CBO, it is unable to pressure the central government over the issue. One unfortunate consequence is that even though the Durban Metro Police are attempting a more aggressive campaign against drugs in the community, their arrests are largely ineffective because SAPS and the courts must prosecute the crimes.

For these reasons, the WFRA sees no entry points to fight the drug problem in the community. Consequently, they have not achieved even incremental victories around the issue and thus no sense of empowerment exists around the problem. Rather the community feels disempowered, as the problem seems too big to tackle. Disempowerment, in turn, discourages action, further fuelling a sense of despair.

For these reasons, to date the WFRA is not addressing the issue, even as it continues to tear the community apart.

*Analysis: Why Success in One Area but Failure in Another?*

Two broad factors explain the successful campaign to end evictions and service cutoffs as compared to the failed one to rid the community of drugs and drug dealers, community response and democracy. We discuss the role of each factor below. We also examine how breaking a large problem into a series of small ones and feedback loops affected the WFRA's success in pressuring the municipal government to be more responsive to housing and service needs, compared to the failed efforts to rid Westcliff of drugs and drug dealers.

When the housing evictions and service cutoffs began, people in the community readily identified with the victims of these actions. They witnessed their neighbors, relatives, and friends fight with municipal officials to keep their homes and access to water and electricity. Moreover, many people in the community could imagine themselves in a similar position and wanted to help. This led to a sense of communal struggle and a simple framing of the issue as right versus wrong, and us versus them. Both facilitated the WFRA's ability to organize and incorporate the community into their activities. As a result, more intense efforts by the municipality to enforce cutoffs and evictions strengthened the sense of communal solidarity and their determination to fight back.

By contrast, drugs have split the community against itself. Although on a cognitive level people are aware that this is an issue of right versus wrong, fear and shame around the issue prevent this cognitive realization for manifesting itself in a sense of communal struggle. Rather than uniting Westcliff around a problem, drugs are tearing families and the community apart. People do not want to engage out of fear of retribution and/or because they don't want to address their family problems in highly visible public forums. In addition, no consensus exists on who is responsible for the problem. Consequently, while evictions and cutoffs brought members of the community together, drugs and drug dealers fracture the community.

Equally as important, while democracy was critical to securing access to better housing and affordable services, it is not working to rid the community of drugs. Two central parts of the campaign to end the evictions and cutoffs were the community learning how to use their rights to keep their homes and realizing that elections created opportunities for them to press their demands for greater government accountability. Unfortunately, democracy is not working to rid the community of drugs because dealers can bribe SAPS and the courts not to enforce drug laws. Corruption undermines the ability of Westcliff's residents to exercise their democratic rights to have the police and courts to uphold the law. One particularly unfortunate consequence of the situation is that it highlights the close links between corruption and insecurity: because the police and courts are not

enforcing the law, the residents of Westcliff live in fear of the drug dealers and the crime that surrounds their activities.

The case studies also highlight that success in the campaign to end cutoffs and evictions did not occur at once. Rather, by necessity, the WFRA broke a big problem into a series of smaller, more manageable ones, and achieved incremental success (as well as suffered numerous setbacks). This was not a conscious choice, especially at the beginning. Instead, the community was attempting to solve certain problems at specific points in time with the resources they had (e.g., how can we block one eviction today?). While the cumulative effect of those efforts was a major victory, it is important to recognize that in retrospect a large part of the WFRA's strategy was to address a large problem they could not address through breaking it up into smaller ones that they could.

Finally, comparing the WFRA's efforts in the two areas also that shows problems in the community are dynamic, not static, situations. This is important to recognize because their different reactions to the two problems created virtuous and vicious cycles. The sense of community that the fight against evictions and cutoffs engendered and the empowerment that resulted from learning how to use their rights led the WFRA to a series of incremental victories and occasional large ones. Success, in turn, encouraged more action. Consequently, the fight to end evictions and cutoffs was a cycle of empowerment.

Lack of action on ridding the community of drugs and drug dealers, by contrast, created a cycle of disempowerment. Rather than fostering a sense of community, the drug problem isolates the residents of Westcliff from each other. In addition, because SAPS and the courts are corruptible, people are not able to enforce their rights. Both discourage people from taking action. Inaction, in turn, deepens feelings of alienation and perceptions that rights are unenforceable. Thus, while the cycle of empowerment caused members of the WFRA to feel they could accomplish ambitious goals, large parts of the community perceive drugs to be a problem that is too large to tackle. A sense of resignation exists around the issue. Many believe that the drug dealers have won and the community must do their best to live among them, even as drugs continue to destroy the lives of their friends, neighbors, and relatives.<sup>11</sup> This sense of hopelessness is visible in the community.

### ***Providing Practical Advice***

Do the case studies provide practical advice for the WFRA and similar organizations? One point they do highlight is that the fight against drugs and drug dealers in Westcliff in many ways is more difficult than the one to stop evictions and service cutoffs:

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<sup>11</sup> In fact, the WFRA has even gone as far as seeking the assistance of drug dealers in fighting some drug-related issues. In the past, many drug users stole copper water pipes that carry water to peoples' homes and sold them to smelters in order to purchase drugs. The WFRA complained to the drug dealers and the thefts ended. While this was a victory of sorts (it ended the pipe thefts), engaging the drug dealers did not provide a sense of empowerment, but rather reinforced the perception that the dealers are stronger than the WFRA.

- The struggle for the latter brought the community together, the scourge of the former is tearing it apart.
- The fight for the latter showed the WFRA how to exercise their democratic rights. The fight against the former has shown them the limits of those rights.
- The campaign to end evictions and service cutoffs empowered the community, while drugs are disempowering them.

For these reasons, on the surface it may seem that no clear lessons apply from the fight for better housing and more affordable services to the one against drugs and drug dealers. Tackling the fear and shame that surrounds the problem is not easy. In addition, creating a sense of communal struggle against the issue is difficult when there is no consensus on who is to blame for the problem. Moreover, pressuring SAPS and the courts to enforce the law is beyond the scope of a small CBO as tolerance for corruption comes from the top of the government. At the core, lack of obvious entry points over the issue means that there are no clear ways to break the cycle of disempowerment.

However, this would be an excessively bleak analysis. It is important to recall that a similar sense of hopelessness pervaded in the late 1990s when the municipal government was hostile to the needs of the community. In addition, as with the fight against drugs, the community initially was very unsure what to do and achieved

only partial successes for the first few years of the campaign. In fact, the first major victory (clear only in retrospect), the moratorium on evictions, occurred three years after the community began to organize to stop them. Learning how success in the fight against evictions and service cutoffs can help in the one against drugs requires examining how the community responded to the former at the time events were occurring, rather than in retrospect.

Viewed from this perspective, the WFRA did not attempt to solve all the issues surrounding evictions and cutoffs all at once. Rather, they did what they could with the resources available to them at the time. An important lesson from the WFRA's success in the anti-eviction and cutoff campaigns is that breaking the cycle of disempowerment began with thinking about how they could turn a big problem into smaller, more manageable ones. They did not seek greater accountability in all areas, just over the most exigent ones they could address.

In order to examine the drug problem from this perspective, we convened a meeting of a few members of the WFRA in May of 2010. Instead of asking how we could address the issue all at once, we asked what smaller ones could the community take to help break the cycle of disempowerment. A few manageable ones did emerge. An important insight was that very few people seek to become addicted to a drug that will ruin their lives and stigmatize their families. As a result, one possible small victory could be to engage youth before they start using drugs. Boredom, in particular, is a problem for youth in Westcliff. Constructive activities, such as sports

and art, are thus a way to fill their time and offer them activities that provide positive reinforcement. Working with schools to discourage youth from dropping out and organizing after-school activities is a similar way to ensure that Westcliff's youth possess alternatives to passing time on street corners. While kicking drug dealers out of Westcliff is not a realistic goal for the WFRA at this time, creating drama clubs and sports leagues is a reasonable one.

A second area where WFRA can break a large problem into a smaller, more manageable one is working with the Metro Durban police. While they lack the capacity to prosecute drug crimes, their arrests have had a positive influence in the community. From our meeting, two potential constructive ways to work with the Durban Metro police emerged. The first is that the WFRA could ask the police to publicize using the anonymous crime reporting hotline in Westcliff. The second is to request the Durban Metro police to set up a satellite police station in Westcliff. Again, while neither of these will solve the larger problem of drug dealers in the community, these actions could reduce some of the tertiary problems they create.

To be certain, these solutions do not address the larger problem of the drugs and drug dealers in the community. At the same time, the initial success in the fight against evictions, transferring ownership of Vasie Williams's flat from her husband to herself, did not solve the problems of evictions. Rather, the incremental success encouraged further action, creating a cycle of empowerment. What the research in this paper highlights is not that CBOs/NGOs can translate large victories in one area

directly to a different area. Instead, it shows that the WFRA solved the problem of securing better access to housing and more affordable services, in part, by breaking one big problem into a series of smaller, more manageable ones and building on partial victories. This lesson can apply to the problem of drugs in Westcliff as well. It is possible that the WFRA can better address the problem of drugs by thinking about how to break the cycle of disempowerment, rather than how to solve the problem once and for all. What is most important is that we learn this lesson by examining the WFRA's own actions. We can apply lessons learned from the fight for better housing and access to affordable services to the one against drugs. To do so requires viewing the problem from the perspective of what the WFRA can do at this time with the resources they possess (as they did with evictions and service cutoffs), rather than from the perspective of a binary outcome being the only set of options.

There are also three more general points comparing the two campaigns reveals for thinking about how to design more effective programs: achieving greater accountability can be a non-linear process, success in one area may not easily translate to other areas, and psychological and social factors can inhibit a community's capacity to address problems effectively.

- *Greater accountability is a non-linear process.* The case studies show that democracy does not progress evenly. This is most evident with respect to the courts. The same court system that guaranteed the residents of Westcliff their right to housing failed in protecting their right to live in a community

free of drug dealers. Consequently, not only can accountability vary across units of government (e.g., the municipal government in Durban versus SAPS), accountability can vary by issue within the same unit of government.

- *Success in one area may not translate into others.* Depending on the issue, one could conclude that the WFRA is a very effective organization or an extremely ineffective one. That success in one campaign may not easily transfer into the ability of an organization to effect change in another area is important to comprehend. While practitioners have long recognized the problem of scaling-up (i.e., a program that is effective in one community may not work in others), they have paid less attention to the possibility that a similar problem could exist when an effective organization attempts to broaden its focus. This is valuable to understand because failure could be worse than not trying at all if it demoralizes members of the organization, thus frustrating future attempts to organize.
- *There may exist psychological and social impediments to confronting a problem.* Practitioners tend to focus on the economic and/or political roots of community problems and the solutions tend to derive from this premise. Thus, action typically focuses on capacity building, changing incentives, and similar actions to create pressure to solve an exigent problem. Yet these were only one constraint in the WFRA's attempt to fight drugs. The WFRA was not able to address the problem of drugs in Westcliff in part because

psychological and social factors inhibited the community from confronting the issue. In many ways, the reluctance to talk about the problem parallels difficulties many communities have in addressing HIV/AIDS. People working on the illness have found that before efforts to fight it can be effective, they must first reduce the stigma around the problem. A similar problem exists in Westcliff. They do not need the police and/or the courts to get drug dealers out of the community since they could kick them out themselves. Yet because of the stigma around the issue and because the drug dealers have embedded themselves into the community, psychological and social factors inhibit them from taking this more direct route to confronting the problem. While there are no easy solutions to this dilemma, it is important to recognize the psychological and social factors may inhibit action on some difficult problems.

### ***Conclusion***

This paper has compared the WFRA's successful efforts to stop evictions and service disconnections to their unsuccessful attempt to rid Westcliff of drugs and drug dealers. We identified two factors that account for these differing outcomes. First, while evictions and cutoffs created a sense communal struggle, drugs are isolating members of the community from each other. Second, whereas the WFRA was able to leverage their democratic rights in the fight against the former, those same rights have been ineffective in dealing with the latter. As a consequence, despite the impressive gains the organization made in ending evictions and service cutoffs, they

have not been successful in fighting the problems drugs and drug dealers are creating in the community. Rather than feeling empowered, they feel disempowered and believe the problem is too big for them to solve.

Beyond explaining the factors that account for the differing outcomes, our research also provides practical advice for the WFRA in addressing Westcliff's drug problem. First, the fight to end evictions and disconnections did not occur all at once, but through many small (and a few large) victories, amidst many setbacks. The community could not address all of the issues at once, but could break a big problem into smaller, more manageable ones. Second, achieving even incremental victories created a sense of empowerment that encouraged future action. By contrast, not taking action to fight drugs and drug dealers creates a sense of hopelessness and disempowerment. In combination, these factors suggest that the WFRA can help break the cycle of disempowerment though looking for small victories they can achieve, such as engaging with youth before they start using drugs. While minor actions are unlikely to solve most of the larger problems drugs are creating in the near future, they can help break the cycle of disempowerment necessary to encouraging future, more ambitious ones.

Although the narrow focus of our research design limits its applicability to other settings, future research can build on the methodology we employ to provide other types of practical advice for civil society organizations. For example, researchers could examine why dissimilar strategies by two organizations in similar

communities achieved the same outcome. Moreover, analysts could examine the effects of the same strategies in dissimilar communities. It is also possible to examine why the same strategies adopted by the same organization achieved divergent outcomes at different points in time. Future research might also examine reactions to advocacy campaigns from the perspective of local governments. In combination each of these narrow focuses can generate a significant amount of useful information that can help civil society organizations be more effective.

For many years, policy makers have understood that good research is indispensable for creating effective policies. Research on civil society, by contrast, tends not to provide such practical information. This is somewhat surprising given the large amounts of money that foreign aid organizations spend on building the capacity of these organizations. In this paper we have attempted to demonstrate how research can provide such practical advice. We hope our efforts catalyze further work in this area.

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